

Young Washington in Pennsylvania

WITHIN the present boundaries of Pennsylvania the young George Washington performed his first important public services, in connection with the first great war in which Americans and Britons fought side by side "for the blessings of religious and civil liberty." The conflict which was known in America as the French and Indian War began in the wilderness of western Pennsylvania, and the man who later gained the title of Father of his Country played a highly significant part in the opening phase of the war.

The future of America was at stake in 1753, when a French army from Canada invaded the upper Allegheny Valley as the opening thrust of a drive to control the Ohio Valley. Control of this great interior valley of North America would halt the westward expansion of the British colonies and confine them to the narrow region east of the Appalachians, condemning them to relative insignificance. The free institutions inherited from the British motherland would be stifled in the shadow of absolute monarchy.

The energetic Governor Robert Dinwiddie of Virginia was not slow to challenge this aggressive move into land claimed by the King of England. His first measure was naturally to give notice of trespass to the French intruders. This would not be an easy task, for hundreds of miles of wilderness lay between the frontier settlements of Virginia and the nearest French post, Fort Le Boeuf (now Waterford, Erie County). He asked a young man of twenty-one, member of a leading Virginia family, to undertake the mission. The young man accepted without hesitation. Thus George Washington began his first great adventure.

He set out from Williamsburg, Virginia, on October 31, 1753, traveling first to Wills Creek (now Cumberland, Maryland), where he hired Christopher Gist to act as his guide. The next day, November 15, he left this post on the edge

of the settled regions, and with Gist and four other companions went on through rain and snow. He reached the forks of the Ohio, the present site of Pittsburgh, about November 23, and described the place as "extremely well situated for a Fort." Next he came to Logstown (near present-day Ambridge). At this famous Indian town he spent five days, in council with the Indians, endeavoring to strengthen their friendship for the English. As a result, three Indian leaders—the Half King, Jeskakake, White Thunder—and a hunter accompanied him when he resumed his journey on November 30.

December 4, Washington and his oddly-assorted escort reached Venango (now Franklin), where French Creek enters the Allegheny River. Here he met the famous French Indian agent Joncaire, who had taken possession of the house of an English trader. Joncaire and his fellow officers entertained the Virginian, with food and otherwise: "The Wine, as they dosed themselves pretty plentifully with it, soon banished the Restraint which at first appeared in their Conversation; and gave a license to the



Washington and Lee University

Washington as a colonel of militia, painted by Charles Willson Peale at Mount Vernon, 1772.

Tongues to reveal their Sentiments more freely. They told me, That it was their absolute Design to take Possession of the Ohio. . . . They were sensible the English could raise two Men for their one; yet they knew their Motions were too slow and dilatory to prevent any Undertaking of theirs. They pretend to have an undoubted Right to the River, from a Discovery made by one La Salle; and the Rise of this Expedition is, to prevent our settling on the River or Waters of it, as they had heard of some Families moving-out. . . .”

Next day it rained so heavily that Washington could not continue his journey. The wily Joncaire took full advantage of his opportunity to influence his Indian companions, plying them with liquor and urging them to remain at Venango for a council. As a result, Washington could not leave until the morning of December 7. Because of “excessive Rains, Snows, and bad Traveling, through many Mires and Swamps,” he did not arrive at Fort Le Boeuf until the 11th.

The commander, Legardeur de Saint Pierre, received him with courtesy. Legardeur de Repentigny, commanding at Fort Presque Isle, who had some knowledge of English, came to translate Dinwiddie’s letter. Thus was the challenge stated:

The lands upon the River Ohio, in the western parts of the Colony of Virginia, are so notoriously known to be the property of the Crown of Great Britain that it is a matter of equal concern and surprise to me, to hear that a body of French forces are erecting fortresses and making settlements upon that river, within his Majesty’s dominions.

. . . It becomes my duty to require your peaceable departure; and that you would forbear prosecuting a purpose so interruptive of the harmony and good understanding, which his Majesty is desirous to continue and cultivate with the most Christian King.

The “elderly Gentleman,” as Washington described Saint Pierre, was unwavering in his resolve to carry out the orders of the French Governor, Marquis Duquesne. When Washington asked him “by what Authority he had made Prisoners of several of our English Subjects,”

THE JOURNAL OF

Major *George Washington*,

SENT BY THE

Hon. *ROBERT DINWIDDIE*, Esq;
His Majesty’s Lieutenant-Governor, and
Commander in Chief of *VIRGINIA*,

TO THE

COMMANDANT

OF THE

FRENCH FORCES

ON

O H I O.

TO WHICH ARE ADDED, THE

GOVERNOR’S LETTER,

AND A TRANSLATION OF THE

FRENCH OFFICER’S ANSWER.

WILLIAMSBURG:

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Colonial Williamsburg, Inc.

Title page of Washington’s Journal of the expedition to Fort Le Boeuf, Williamsburg, 1754.

he replied “that the Country belong’d to them; that no Englishman had a Right to trade upon those Waters; and that he had Orders to make every Person Prisoner who attempted it on the Ohio, or the Waters of it.” His letter of reply to the Governor of Virginia was equally firm. A single line of this answer sums it up: “As to the summons you send me to retire, I do not think myself obliged to obey it.” The letter closed with polite expressions of esteem for the Governor and his representative: “I have made it my duty to treat Mr. Washington with all the respect owing to your dignity and his personal merit, and I flatter myself, Sir, that he will do me the justice to be my witness for it with you. . . .” Continuous intrigue and interference by the French with his Indian escort revealed the aggressive intention under the friendly veneer.

The journey homeward was even more arduous than the trip to the French fort. The French

gave Washington and his party a canoe for the trip down French Creek, but they had "a tedious and very fatiguing Passage." The stream was turbulent and full of floating ice; several times they had to "remain in the Water Half an Hour or more, getting over the Shoals." Though they left Fort Le Boeuf on December 16, they did not arrive at Venango until the 22nd. Here the Indians gave in to the blandishments of the French, and Washington went on with only his white companions. The horses were tired and overloaded with baggage, so that they traveled very slowly. After three days of slow progress, Washington decided to set out with Gist by the "nearest Way through the Woods, on Foot." He left the interpreter Van Braam in charge of the baggage, to bring it along as fast as might be convenient.

Never did Washington more clearly demonstrate his courage and determination to do his duty than when he set out on the 26th with

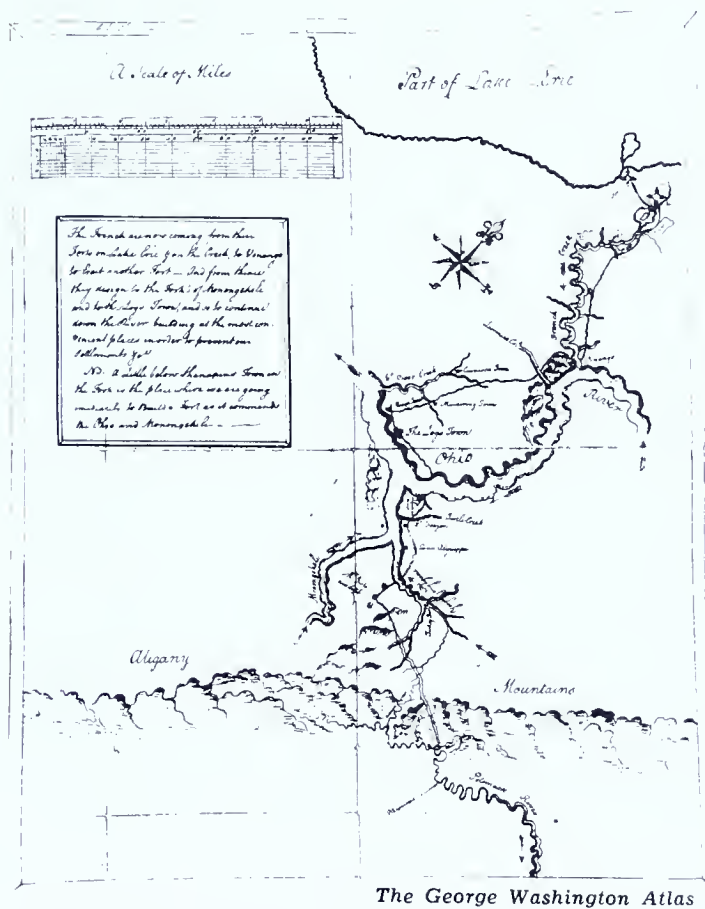
Gist as his sole companion. To the heavy snow and icy winds was added the peril from hostile Indians. One fired a shot at them the next day, and they traveled by night to escape pursuit. Poling across the Allegheny River on a hastily-contrived raft, Washington was thrown into the half-frozen river, but caught hold of the raft and saved himself. They spent the night on an island; next day the river had frozen enough to permit them to cross on solid ice.

Washington returned to Williamsburg on January 16, 1754, and delivered the French reply to Governor Dinwiddie. He also gave the Governor the journal which he had kept of his adventures, and was much surprised when Dinwiddie ordered it to be printed. This straightforward, if unpolished, narrative—with its many details describing the French fort and the French attitude—made a strong impression both in the American colonies and in Great Britain. Keen-minded, alert to observe, young Washington had prepared convincing proof of the actuality of danger from the French.

The issue was made plain, and in the war which developed from Dinwiddie's challenge to the French invasion, Washington rendered other notable services. In the spring of 1754, he commanded a force of Virginia militia sent to aid the new British fort which was being erected at the forks of the Ohio. The French captured it before he had crossed the mountains, but he continued his advance into southwestern Pennsylvania. On May 28, he surprised a small French detachment under Villiers de Jumonville on Laurel Hill in Fayette County. The skirmish which followed was the first battle of the French and Indian War. Jumonville was killed, and all but one of his party killed or taken prisoner.

Knowing that his force was inferior in number to the French, Washington finally retreated to the Great Meadows (ten miles east of present-day Uniontown, on the National Road), where Fort Necessity was hastily built. Beseiged by French and Indians in superior numbers on July 3, Washington was compelled to surrender. The French permitted him and the garrison to "retire into his own country." Shortage of supplies and ammunition and lack of men had led to the first defeat of Washington's career.

He served with distinction on the two later campaigns against the French in western Penn-



Washington's sketch map of country traveled between Cumberland, Md., and Fort Le Boeuf, 1753-54. Original in Public Record Office, London.

sylvania. In 1755, as volunteer aide on the staff of General Edward Braddock, he gave the British commander good advice which, if followed, might have averted the crushing defeat on July 9. Four bullet holes in his clothing, two horses shot under him, were evidence of his personal bravery in this disastrous battle. He helped carry the mortally wounded Braddock from the field.

Appreciation of his ability and leadership was then manifested by the government of Virginia, which made him colonel and commander-in-chief of the forces protecting the frontier of that colony. He did not take part in another major campaign on Pennsylvania soil until 1758, when he joined the expedition led by General John Forbes to capture Fort Duquesne, the French fort on the site of modern Pittsburgh. He was with the advance troops which occupied the ruins of Fort Duquesne on November 25, 1758, shortly after the French had burned the fort and retreated to Venango. This success virtually ended the war as far as Virginia was concerned. After four years of faithful service to both the colonies and the mother country, Colonel George Washington resigned his commission and returned to the pleasant and industrious life of his Virginia estates. Six weeks later, he married Mrs. Martha Dandridge Custis.

The experience and training which George Washington gained during the stirring years of

the French and Indian War in western Pennsylvania were of inestimable value in later years when he led the armies of the United States in the War for Independence. He came out of the French and Indian War the most distinguished soldier in all the thirteen colonies. Acquaintance with many noted officers had been made, some of whom were to fight with him, some against him, in later days. He had seen the mistakes of others and had learned from them. He had demonstrated courage and resourcefulness, and faithfulness in carrying out every task assigned to him.

To many of us the French and Indian War seems lost in a dim past, obscured by the thrilling events of the Revolutionary War. Its significance as a struggle for liberty, as a conflict between the free principles of English institutions and the authoritarianism of the old French Regime, has been slighted, largely because the French King for reasons of self-interest helped us to win independence. Victory in the French and Indian War made possible the settlement of western Pennsylvania, and the western expansion of the American people. While the French threat still existed in the north, Americans could not think of severing their political ties with the mother country. The downfall of the French empire in America thus opened the way for American independence.



Replica of Washington's Fort Necessity, based on archeological findings and contemporary accounts, is located at Fort Necessity National Battlefield, near Farmington, Fayette County.